Across the party wall

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Vietnam's Communist Party is in a bit of a mess, but China's may have little to teach it

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IF THE following pressing themes remind you of China, spare a thought for Vietnam: a debate over the constitution; efforts to curb the privileges of state-owned enterprises; fury over official corruption; poorly compensated land-grabs; new restrictions on online dissent; a recognition that further economic reform is not just desirable but essential; and, in politics, evidence of fierce factional struggles among high leaders.

China and Vietnam have two of the few Communist Parties still in power, so it is hardly surprising that they face many of the same problems. What might alarm them most, however, is the shortage of obvious solutions. Both parties scheduled meetings of their central committees this autumn. Both plenums were seen in advance as important in the evolution of national reforms. China's plenum is due next month. Vietnam's has come and gone, producing few apparent signs of new thinking. The Communist Party of Vietnam seems in more of a pickle.

High on the Vietnamese communists' agenda were proposed changes to the country's constitution. The current version, adopted in 1992 and last tweaked in 2001, no longer reflects the more open economy and society that Vietnam has become. A revised draft

was distributed for public reaction early this year. The result was startling: more than 26m comments were received. Many were not ones the party wanted to hear.

Three clauses in particular attracted attention. Liberals hoped the constitution might guarantee an independent judiciary. At present it promises that the state "shall unceasingly strengthen socialist legality". Some had also hoped for a change to Article Four, which enshrines the role of the Communist Party as "the force leading the state and society" in a one-party system. And third, many people argued that Article 19, which declares that "the state economic sector shall play the leading role in the national economy", is both obsolete and damaging. Vietnam is suffering from the effects of a debt crisis brought on partly by the profligacy of its state-owned enterprises. Economic growth of around 5% a year is too slow to provide jobs for a young population, and the economy is unlikely to do much better next year.

Cleaning up the state sector, perhaps by privatising the profitable bits (brewers, for example) and trimming the loss-makers (most of the rest), is a prerequisite for returning to faster growth. It may also be essential if Vietnam succeeds in joining an American-led free-trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership. But dismantling the "state economic sector" is terrifying for many. Not only are officials corrupt beneficiaries of business links. The system also helps to justify single-party rule.

After the plenum, committees will continue tinkering with the constitution's wording. But it seems clear that much will be dodged. Vietnam will still be saddled with a charter that barely recognises the profound transformation it underwent with *doi moi* ("renovation") in 1986, let alone the rapid changes since.

China's example is not much help here, even though it too has been debating its constitution. The crucial difference is that, in China, the party's critics want it simply to respect the present constitution. That document promises equality, freedoms of speech, assembly and religion, and an independent judiciary, all of which the Communist Party ignores. Even the party's leading role is mentioned only in the preamble rather than in the body of the document. So recent months have seen China's official press rail against "constitutionalism"—ie, the outrageous notion that the constitution should be respected—as the latest way in which the West is seeking to undermine the country by sneaking in dangerously subversive liberal notions.

Article Four would be less of an issue in Vietnam if the party were not held in such disrespect. Partly this is a consequence of the economic mismanagement of recent years. Partly it reflects disgust with official corruption, seen as pervasive, especially at the very heart of government. This is one reason why, in a vote in the spring in the National Assembly, which shows more gumption than China's equivalent parliament, nearly one-third of members expressed low confidence in the prime minister, Nguyen Tan Dung. Anger at a corrupt government also explains why Doan Van Vuon, a northern fish farmer jailed for five years in April, became a folk hero. His crime was to defend his land, with homemade guns and explosives, when officials came to confiscate it. Land-

grabs are a common cause of protest in China, too, and reforms to the land-ownership system that fosters the abuses could (or, rather, should) be one of the big decisions announced at its party plenum.

Take me to your leader

In China, too, those who stand up are often lionised through social media. In Vietnam, as in China, a crackdown has taken place this year on vocal online dissent, with dozens locked up and new limits to online discourse. In Vietnam only “personal information”, and not news articles, may be exchanged online. This seems to be a doomed attempt to reclaim the monopoly on sources of mass information that the party enjoyed before the internet arrived. Even if the crackdown were enforceable, it would be too late to extinguish the cynicism about party and government that is smouldering in Vietnam, as in China.

That cynicism is fuelled by the perception that party leaders are less interested in the national good than in protecting their own power from attacks by envious rivals. In China the downfall of Bo Xilai, an ambitious provincial leader, drew rare, public attention to the bareknuckle fights in elite politics. In Vietnam Mr Dung, the prime minister, seems the target of a campaign by more conservative party leaders, such as President Truong Tan Sang. The difference is that in China, factional struggle has produced a clear winner in Xi Jinping, the party leader. Part of Vietnam’s problem is that nobody seems sure who is really in charge.

Nguồn: http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21588359-vietnams-communist-party-bit-mess-chinas-may-have-little-teach-it-across